

SPARTANS IN DOLDRUMS

WYCOMBE'S FA Challenge Trophy rout of Blyth proves that a team, which only a year ago seemed destined to sweep all before them, now faces a period of regrouping and rebuilding.

For to put it quite simply Spartans never looked like beating the Southerners on their notorious sloping pitch.

Blyth are desperately short of players. They travelled South with only 13 men — including young Paul Ross

By PHILIP SMITH

WYCOMBE WANDERERS 3; BLYTH SPARTANS 0

who has yet to make his senior debut for the club.

Spartans took the field with only two recognised strikers and one midfield man in the team. Consequently, as manager Jack Marks frankly admits, the team was horribly unbalanced.

Add to that coach Peter Flaherty's assessment that some players were not pulling their weight, sloppy marking which cost Blyth two setpiece goals, the unusual pitch, lack of match practice and it's easy to see why Blyth lost.

Marks pulled no punches when he said: "We need more players.

"We have lost nine senior players this season and it showed on Saturday. We were asking men to play out of position and this unbalanced the team — but we had to because we don't have the right type or number of players.

"If you have a big squad it puts pressure on players for their places and it makes them play harder and concentrate more.

SUPPORT

"Today we lost two goals to setpieces and for both of them we told the players what Wycombe would do, but they lost concentration and failed to stop them scoring.

"We know now we are in for a period of regrouping and rebuilding to get the right players. We have told the board this and have got

their full support."

Blyth had the worst possible start to Saturday's game — going a goal down after seven minutes.

A right wing corner to the near post was back headed by Steve Hardwick and the ball dropped over Dave Clarke's head into the net, despite Ron Guthrie's despairing effort to clear.

Wycombe then tied the game up in midfield and all round looked sharper and quicker than Spartans.

Spartans' lack of punch was demonstrated by John Maskell making his first save five minutes before the interval, by pulling down a Guthrie header from under the bar after a Dave Varty cross.

At this stage Spartans looked to be coming more into the match but then Wycombe struck a killer goal.

A free kick midway inside Blyth's half was floated into the box and as no-one else moved for it Stewart Atkins dashed in to power a header in the bottom corner, far beyond Clarke's reach.

Just on half time Wycombe's John Priestley was injured in a tackle by Ron Guthrie and had to be stretchered off.

The second period saw more effort from Spartans as Wycombe sat back on their

lead and let Blyth go at them.

Peter Davies went close with a glancing header that skimmed by a post.

Blyth brought on Mick Dagless for Ron Guthrie in an attempt to add more fire power up front.

Alan Walker earned a yellow card from the referee for a wild tackle on a Wycombe player.

UNLUCKY

Spartans were desperately unlucky not to reduce the deficit when Peter Davies slammed an overhead kick again the bar with 20 minutes to go. It was symptomatic of Blyth's luck that the ball bounced into touch instead of falling back into the path of advancing Blyth forwards.

Terry Johnson then squandered a wonderful chance when he miskicked as the ball dropped at his feet six yards out from goal.

Inevitably, Blyth's efforts left them stretched at the back and a Wycombe breakaway goal came.

A clearance was intercepted and pumped into the Blyth goalmouth where Steve Long climbed well to head over Clarke.

Wycombe: Maskell, Birdseye, Davies, Mead, Phillips, Hardwick, Atkins, Holifield, Long, Scott, Priestley. Sub: Judd.

Blyth: Clarke, Waterson, Walker, Varty, Houghton, Dixon, Davies, Guthrie, Johnson, Wall, Carney. Sub: Dagless.